

USSR-JAPAN: Increased Acrimony

Relations between the USSR and Japan have deteriorated markedly. Conflicting security policies pursued more vigorously by new leaders in Tokyo and Moscow are the heart of the problem. Both sides have reason to take some of the current heat out of the relationship, and public manifestations of the problem may subside in the near term. Even so, the abrasiveness that has characterized relations since the invasion of Afghanistan and the likelihood that the new leaders will not make major substantive concessions strongly suggest that the impasse will persist for the foreseeable future.

[REDACTED]

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Soviet Threats

Moscow attacked the new emphasis on defense as a revival of "militarism." It reacted to the "aircraft carrier" remark by denouncing Nakasone by name and by indicating that Japan could become a target for nuclear attack.

[REDACTED]

While Nakasone was in Washington, the USSR made public its earlier INF proposal to move some SS-20 missiles to Siberia--out of range of Western Europe but within range of Japan. The Soviets have since told Japanese officials that SS-20s in East Asia are not directed at Japan but are defensive weapons made necessary by US bases in South Korea and Japan.

[REDACTED]

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The threat to transfer SS-20s from Europe, however, has made both the Japanese Government and public more aware of the INF issue. The Japanese have asked for close consultation with the US on the INF talks and are increasingly interested in a dialogue with NATO. [REDACTED]

Tokyo believes the Soviet campaign is designed to intimidate Japan, foment discord in US-Japanese relations, and stimulate popular and business pressure against the Prime Minister. Public opinion polls indicate many Japanese are worried by Nakasone's tough stand on defense, but there has been nearly universal resentment of Moscow's heavyhanded threats. These threats have reinforced Nakasone's firm approach to relations with the USSR, and he has made clear that he will not be bullied. [REDACTED]

The tough Soviet rhetoric also is aimed at arousing fear of Japanese militarism in other Asian countries, particularly China. In addition to preventing the establishment of a formal security relationship among China, Japan, and the US, the USSR is trying to undermine current understandings among the three powers on security issues. [REDACTED]

The Soviet effort to drive a wedge between the Japanese and Chinese has not been particularly effective. Last month Nakasone sent an emissary to Beijing to reaffirm good relations and discuss Japan's diplomatic and defense posture. The visit was generally successful, with the Chinese endorsing a limited defensive buildup and stronger US ties. Publicly and privately, the Chinese continue to express understanding of Tokyo's view of the Soviet threat. [REDACTED]

The recent increase in tension stemming from conflicting security policies is taking place against a backdrop of continued acrimony over the so-called "Northern Territories." Nakasone has made it clear that there can be no major improvement in either political or economic relations until all four of the disputed islands are returned to Japan, something that the USSR has consistently refused to do. [REDACTED]

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Maintaining a Dialogue

Despite the increasing tension, both sides have displayed an interest in maintaining contacts. Nakasone believes it is imperative to keep channels of communication open to Japan's principal adversary. Moscow hopes to entice Japanese businessmen to put pressure on Tokyo to relax adherence to Western restrictions on trading with the USSR. [REDACTED]

In mid-February Fisheries Minister Kamentsev became the first Soviet minister to make an official visit to Japan since the invasion of Afghanistan. In late February a 250-member business delegation visited Moscow. Little substantive progress was made during these exchanges, but Soviet-Japanese dialogue will continue. [REDACTED]

The Japanese will host the annual Soviet-Japanese administrative-level talks in early April. Another Japanese business delegation will visit the USSR in June. [REDACTED]

Outlook

The public controversy over security issues may abate somewhat in the near future. Conservative leaders in Tokyo face a series of elections in the next few months and believe the current degree of public anxiety over security policy is not to their advantage. As a result, Nakasone has agreed to focus on more politically rewarding domestic issues. [REDACTED]

Moreover, the Japanese are interested in preventing the relationship from sliding further. The Soviets maintain an interest in involving Japanese industry in trade and Siberian development, and they may tone down their rhetoric to improve the atmosphere. [REDACTED]

Nonetheless, there is little prospect for any measurable improvement in bilateral relations. Moscow is likely to pursue a hard line against Japan throughout the region as long as Tokyo maintains its current policies on defense and the Northern Territories. [REDACTED]

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